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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the roles of both belief similarity and dialect style on white subjects' attitudes and nonverbal behaviors toward black or white people in a face to face interaction. The experimental design consisted of six cells defined by two levels of belief similarity crossed by three levels of the race and dialect manipulations (white confederates speaking white English, and black confederates speaking black English). Eighty-eight white undergraduate women recruited from a state college in Connecticut were selected as subjects for the study. The experiment consisted of three parts: filling out an attitude questionnaire which included the 7 items used for the belief manipulation task, an irrelevant intervening task, and the belief similarity manipulation. Findings indicate that dialect style is one important variable in interracial perception. (Author/AM)

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Effects of Belief Similarity and Dialect Style on Interracial Interaction

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Over the past decade and a half a considerable amount of research has been concerned with the role of perceived similarity in interracial perception. Quite a bit of evidence (cf. Byrne, 1971; Dienstbier, 1972; Ehrlich, 1973) has accumulated which indicates that perception of another's similarity can strongly affect responses toward the other. Ehrlich (1973) has summarized these findings in the area of interracial attitudes in his "corollary of ethnic congruity" which states that "the greater the perceived similarity between an ethnic person and the actor, the lower the personal distance" (p.82).

It is evident that similarity can be perceived on a number of dimensions, such as ideology, culture, social class, and behavior, to name a few, and that responses to similarity can be on any number of dimensions. However, research on perceived similarity has, for the most part, centered on the dimension of ideology or belief with responses measured on attitude scales or simple social choice measures. This emphasis has been unfortunate in that researchers have tended to ignore other types of similarity which would seem to be important and to neglect the roles that different kinds of similarity play in interracial interaction. One type of similarity which would seem to play an important role in interracial interaction is dialect style (black vs white English).

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At least three factors point to the importance of this variable. First, a person's speech is one of the most salient aspects of his person in a face-to-face interaction and differences in dialect often provide indications of more general differences in background and culture. Second, particularly in the case of black English, a person's dialect has important educational implications (cf. Labov, 1972). Third, a person's speech style appears to have considerable effect on how he is treated by others, particularly peers (cf. Labov, 1972). The present study investigates the roles of both belief similarity and dialect style on white subjects' attitudes and non-verbal behaviors toward a black or white other in a face-to-face interaction.

Method

Design

The experimental design consisted of six cells defined by two levels of belief similarity crossed by three levels of the Race and Dialect manipulations--white confederates speaking white English, black confederates speaking black English. (Cells in which white confederates spoke black English were not included due to the artificiality of that combination and difficulties encountered in teaching white confederates to speak realistic black English). The effects of Race and Dialect in this design were separated through the use of contrasts.

Subjects

Subjects were 88 white undergraduate women recruited from a state college in Connecticut and paid to participate in studies of "attitudes

and interviewing." Of these, 25 were pilot subjects and 63 participated in the main experiment.

Confederates

Two black and two white college-aged females served as confederates. Confederates used scripts during the interview and were trained to act in a standard way both verbally and nonverbally toward all subjects. The importance of maintaining consistent behavior toward all subjects was emphasized throughout the experiment.

Independent variables

Dialect manipulation. The dialect manipulation was accomplished through the use of scripts for each dialect, which, while containing the same information, differed in wording and in the use of pronunciations and certain grammatical constructions common to black English. The white English script was prepared first giving the answers to the interview questions. This script was then rewritten by the black confederates into black English and then verified for authenticity by a black professor familiar with black English. The black confederates learned both scripts and rehearsed them until they attained equal proficiency in each.

Belief manipulation. Subjects' perceptions of the confederate's attitudes were manipulated by showing the subject a questionnaire purportedly filled out by the confederate. In the Agree condition the confederate's responses to five of the seven items were on the same side of the midpoint of the scale as the subject's while responses to the other two items were on the opposite side of the scale. In the Disagree condition this pattern was reversed.

Procedure

The experimental session was divided into three parts which were portrayed as three separate experiments. In the first part subjects filled out an attitude questionnaire which included the seven items used for the belief manipulation. This was followed by an irrelevant intervening task during which the experimenter faked the confederate's attitude questionnaire. The final portion of the experiment consisted of the belief similarity manipulation in which subjects were shown the confederate's attitude questionnaire followed by a simulated interview in which the subject interviewed the confederate for a job. Following the interview subjects filled out a questionnaire on their reactions to the interview and confederate, were interviewed about their perceptions of the experiment, and were debriefed.

Dependent measures

Nonverbal behaviors. Seven nonverbal measures were used. Four of these were drawn from Mehrabian's (1969) work on immediacy cues. These include 1) physical distance at which the subject placed her chair in relation to the confederate, 2) forward body lean, 3) eye contact, and 4) shoulder orientation. In addition to these immediary cues three other nonverbal measures were used. These were 1) the angle at which the subject placed her chair in relation to the confederate, 2) proportion of time during the interaction which the subject smiled and 3) the length of the interview. All measures except the distance and orientation of subjects' chair placement and the length of the interview were coded by two independent coders. Reliability coefficients ranged from .75 to .98.

Questionnaire measures. Following the interaction subjects filled out a questionnaire which included scales assessing the following dimensions: 1) reaction to the interview, 2) mood, 3) liking and friendship for the confederate, 4) social distance, and 5) personality ratings of the confederate.

Results

Preliminary analyses of the data showed only one overall confederate effect (which did not alter the interpretation of the data) and hence this factor was added to the error term. Also manipulation checks showed that the Belief and Dialect manipulations had been successful.

An overall multivariate analysis of variance for all questionnaire measures revealed three significant effects. First, a significant main effect was obtained for Dialect ($F=2.19$, $df=33/22$, $p < .03$) such that subjects were generally more favorable to the black confederate when she spoke white English. Second, a significant main effect was obtained for the Race of the confederate ($F=2.497$, $df=33/22$, $p < .02$) with white confederates rated more favorable than black confederates. No significant effects were obtained for the Belief manipulation. However, a significant Belief-by-Dialect interaction ($F=2.286$, $df=33/22$, $p < .03$) was obtained for black confederates in which confederates in the Black English-Disagree condition were rated the most favorable while those in the White English-Disagree condition were rated the least favorably. When the confederate agreed with the subject the difference between dialect conditions was smaller and in the opposite direction.

No significant effects were obtained for the nonverbal measures. However, correlation of these measures with a measure of affiliation suggested that the nonverbal measures had different meanings depending upon the confederate's race and dialect. While affiliation was positively correlated with immediacy (as computed by Mehrabian's, 1969, formula) when the confederate was white (r=.54), this correlation was zero when the confederate was black and spoke white English (r=-.009) and negative when the black confederate spoke black English (r=-.301).

Discussion

The significant main effect for Dialect on the questionnaire measures strongly supports the idea that dialect style is an important variable in interracial perception. As expected, subjects were more favorable toward the black confederate when she spoke white English than when she used a black dialect. These results suggest that the previous emphasis on belief in studies of perceived similarity has been too narrow and that other types of similarity need to be studied. One general type of similarity which could be fruitfully explored is that of cultural similarity. Dialect differences can serve as an indicator of more general cultural differences and it is quite possible that the results reported here represent only a glimpse of the importance of cultural similarity.

Several issues are raised by the results for the Belief and Race variables. The most striking is the fact that the pattern of results reported here is the opposite of that found in previous studies (cf.

Dienstbier, 1972). While most previous studies have reported strong main effects for Belief with few significant effects for Race, the questionnaire results of the present study showed a strong main effect for Race with a nonsignificant Belief effect. The differences in results between this and previous studies can most likely be attributed to differences in the relative saliences of race and belief in this and previous studies and points up the need to specify boundary conditions when assessing the relative strengths of race and belief.

The Belief-by-Dialect interaction indicated that subjects' reactions to the confederates dialect was influenced by her attitudinal agreement or disagreement. This interaction was unanticipated and, while its interpretation is unclear, suggests that attention needs to be payed to the ways in which different types of perceived similarity interact.

Finally the nonsignificant results for the nonverbal measures may have been due, at least in part, to differences in the meanings of the nonverbal cues between conditions. The correlations between immediacy and affiliation suggested that nonverbal immediacy directly reflected affiliation only when the subject interacted with a white confederate. While the interpretation is speculative at present, the zero and negative correlations between affiliation and immediacy in the black confederate conditions may be a reflection of ambivalence on the part of subjects toward the black confederate (cf. Katz, 1970).

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FOOTNOTES

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